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For the beginning or general student, dialectology and the history of the English language can both be taught with a common frame of reference provided by certain principles of linguistic change. Related in obvious ways with the history of language but often overlooked in dialectology, these principles are (1) that any living language is certain to be changed by its speakers, (2) that speakers who use a language together change it similarly, (3) that different languages become more alike as their speakers communicate with one another, and (4) that speakers who use a language separately change it differently. For instance, because the speakers of Indo-European separated into groups isolated from one another, the natural changes which occurred in the language differed from group to group until the resultant languages became mutually unintelligible. Similarly, dialect differences now common in the United States have occurred because of the isolation of various groups in the culture and can be explained in terms of linguistic change. Dialects, which are now maintained because a child learns the dialect of his acquaintances, will converge when the various groups in the culture interact with one another. (JS)

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Dialect and Linguistic Change

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Introductions to dialectology and to the history of the English language are noticeable if not prominent features of many new English programs. While these introductions are usually presented as separate subjects or units, it is my contention that at least for the beginning or general student they are more profitably treated with a common frame of reference. Such a frame of reference is provided by certain principles of linguistic change.

The connection between linguistic change and the history of a language is obvious enough. The history of English, for example, consists essentially of the borrowing and invention and obsolescence of words, of fluctuation in their meanings, of shifts in sounds and ways of writing them, and of alterations in systems of grammatical signaling. Without events of this sort, a language could acquire no history—except in the sense of changes in the number and location of its speakers, the nature and extent of its uses, and other circumstances external to the language itself.

The relationship between linguistic change and dialect, on the other hand, is easy to overlook. Absorbed in correlating speech differences with geographical or social or other factors, we may get or create the impression that such factors are the primary causes of such dialect differences instead of merely accessories before or after the fact of linguistic change. Thus the notion may develop that something in the "South Midland" climate predisposes its inhabitants to being "humor" with the sound of "you". The next, more disastrous step may be the attribution of dialects to qualities inherent in their speakers—to character, intelligence, or race.

This kind of misconception must be forestalled or countered by the truth of the matter: that any child learns the dialect of those among whom he is reared. Intentionally or otherwise, he and his associates introduce changes in it, but the pressures for communication with one another keep the changes similiar for each speaker. If some move away and lose contact with the others, however, or are socially ostracized, the changes introduced by the two groups are dissimilar, resulting in different dialects and in time perhaps different languages.

Self-evident, if oversimplified, as this view may be to many of us, it has a long way to go before reaching popular acceptance. Yet some discussions of the subject that are otherwise most enlightening do not bother to portray it clearly. In the recent NCTE pamphlet, *Discovering American Dialects,* a chapter on "The Reasons for Dialect Differences" correctly includes the negative injunction that "climate, thickness of lips, or skin color have absolutely nothing to do with speech." But the positive explanations, under the headings of "settlement history," "population shift," and "physical geography," neglect to relate these secondary factors to the more fundamental reason, linguistic change.

On being assured in the pamphlet, for instance, that "dialect differences which are found on opposite sides of a river, a mountain range, or a desert were probably established many years ago," a naive but thoughtful reader will understand how the geographical barrier perpetuates existing differences. But he may wonder what brought about the differences in the beginning. The sections on settlement and migration patterns show only that dialect differences, once in being, are reinforced by continued separation or modified through contact. Curiosity about the origin of the differences is not fully satisfied by the information given in the pamphlet that the earliest settlers transplanted them from England to the colonies.

What, then, are some principles of linguistic change that can help to account for the differences and place dialectology and history in a common perspective? First, of course, is the inevitability of linguistic change. *Any living language is certain to be changed by its speakers,* conscientiously or whimsically or, at the very least, involuntarily. This sort of change goes on regardless of other languages, would occur if there were no others. Its divergent effect may eventually transform the language almost beyond recognition, so that the original speakers would find the latest version as untelligible as ours would be to an Angle or a Saxon of 400 A.D.

If, however, the latter had survived for fifteen hundred years, he would have contributed to and kept abreast of the changes that constitute the history of English, for a second principle is that *speakers who use a language together change it similarly.* Closely related is a third, that *different languages become more alike as their speakers communicate across them.* Such interaction encourages another kind of change, from the mere lending and borrowing of individual words to more pervasive influences on sounds and syntax, that is convergent in its effects. Less inevitable than divergent change, if only because it could not happen to a sole or solitary language, it is equally important in a polyglot, mobile society, such as our own, in the United States of 1968.

The fourth and last principle is that *speakers who use a language separately change it differently.* Death, so celebrated a leveler in other respects, is the chief agent of linguistic divergence. As each generation's mouths and ears are stopped, so that it can not participate in subsequent changes, its version of the language begins turning into a relic—an historical "dialect" if you will. But the living can become separated also, both socially and geographically, thus producing different dialects, and even personality itself can isolate each individual enough that he creates an individual "idiolect" within the dialect. The distinct dialects of social classes are currently receiving much attention. At an earlier time, however, far more emphasis was given to the differences correlated with geographical separation.

By way of demonstration, our frame of reference—based on the facts of linguistic change—may now be applied to the well-known Indo-European hypothesis. Most of the languages of western civilization are supposed to have the same ancestor, a tongue spoken in central Europe perhaps as late as 2500 B.C. The hypothesis is frequently illustrated with a family-tree diagram, from which the pre-history of English, for instance, can be traced through a paternal Anglo-Saxon, a "grandfather" West Germanic, and a "great-grandfather" "Germanic," back to Indo-European itself. But scrupulous authors warn against taking the figure literally. Indo-European did not mate, reproduce, age, and die like a person. It merely changed, similarly for speakers who used it together and differently for those who became separated.

If generation after generation of its earliest speakers had remained together, they would inevitably have changed their language. After five thousand years it might have changed more than its "English" version has in less than half the time. Yet its latest speakers, all inheriting and modifying and using the same version, might be as unaware of its eventful history as most English speakers are of the development of their version.

But, the speakers of Indo-European did not remain together. Instead, they broke into groups that migrated to various parts of Europe and Asia. In their new and separate locations, they changed their language as inevitably as if they had stayed together, but the changes differed from group to group. For a while, if they had met again, they could have communicated in spite of noticing the differences. In time, however, some of the dialects diverged to the point of mutual unintelligibility. The stage was set for the astounding nineteenth-century discovery that such "different languages" as English and Sanskrit were sisters under the skin. The dialect differences now commonly recognized in the United States came about as

a result of similar causes—all of them explainable in terms of linguistic change.

The neatness of this account, of course, requires a certain amount of qualification. Indo-European was not necessarily so uniform when the migrations began. And certainly its divergence into dialects and languages has been complicated by convergent changes through continuing or renewed contact among the groups—such as the interaction between English and French following the Norman Conquest. But if the analysis is generally valid, it may keep students from getting lost amid the tangles of contemporary American dialectology.

Here in America, the last few years have seen a shift from preoccupation with regional differences to an equal or greater concern with social differences, especially those marking the disadvantaged urban minorities. Much of what was formerly called "non-standard usage" is now being re-examined—quite properly—in the perspective of social dialect, that is, in terms of linguistic change. As the focus widens from an individual's deviant speech to that of the associates from whom he learned it, *we must make clear that it was no more inherent in them than it is in him.*

In the case of a highly visible minority, the temptation to regard audible differences as something other than the product of social separation plus linguistic change is particularly strong. To make headway against it, the principles in the frame of reference must be sharply taught: Speakers inevitably change a language. They change it similarly as long as they use it together, but when groups use it separately it diverges into dialects. Nevertheless, the dialects will converge if the groups once again talk to one another.

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